

Parody and *Testimonio* in Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* and *El Asco*

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Abstract: This article explores two post-war Central American fictional works, *Insensatez* (2004) and *El asco: Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador* (1997) by Horacio Castellanos Moya, to see them as a sort of postmodern parody (as argued by Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody*) of the classic *testimonio*. In Latin America, the *testimonio* emerged as a genre in the seventies and eighties during the civil wars, reflecting on the injustices suffered by Indigenous people, the struggles of campesinos, and the working class to attain their rights. Nevertheless, with the end of civil wars and dictatorships, we have also allegedly witnessed the end of *testimonio* as a genre; John Beverley stated: "the moment of *testimonio* is over." ("The Real Thing" 77). However, *testimonio* as a mode of reading literature (that existed even before it was classified as a genre in the North), which was thought to be over, shows sparks of its presence in contemporary Central American fiction. Thus, these fictional works parody the *testimonio* as a genre – which means they subvert the genre's key aspects while drawing on them to describe post-war narratives from the region.

Key Words: *Testimonio*, parody, post-modernism, Central America, post-civil-war fiction.

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Introduction

This article explores post-Civil War¹ Central American literature to interpret it as a sort of postmodern parody of classic *testimonio*. The texts studied in this article —*El asco: Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador* and *Insensatez*— reveal the reality of post-war disillusion in the Central American Society. These two contemporary texts discussed here were published at different times. *El asco*, published in 1997, describes almost the immediate consequences of the end of the civil war in El Salvador. *Insensatez*, published in 2004, not only depicts the post-war violence in Guatemalan society in the twenty-first century but also documents the traumatic experiences generated by the civil war within the indigenous community. We can see then a general transition from State oppression to new forms of everyday violence under neoliberalism.

In Central America, *testimonio* emerged during the period of civil war and insurgency in the 1970s and 1980s as a means of reflecting on the injustices suffered by Indigenous people and the struggles of campesinos and the working class to attain their rights. In this struggle for equality, they aimed to achieve a better, more just society. Moreover, *testimonio* came to be associated with revolutionary movements, leftist politics, and the resistance of marginalized groups against oppressive dictatorships. In North American academic circles, it emerged as a prominent subject of discussion originating from the South, gaining recognition, and often being valued above conventional literary forms. Scholars frequently compare *testimonio* with traditional literature, aiming not only to highlight their differences but also to critique established literary norms while elevating *testimonio* as an alternative. For example, George Yúdice argued that testimonial writing challenges the very idea of literature, which can no longer be seen as an independent cultural practice shaped solely by social and political contexts. According to Yúdice, *testimonio*, as an expression from marginalized voices, not only introduces new narrative forms but also questions the foundations of literary studies as a discipline.²

North American critic John Beverley seems to locate the similarity between *testimonio* and the novel largely in their length. He puts forward his own definition of *testimonio* as

a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience (Te Margin at the Centre" 24).

According to this view, a *testimonio* may resemble a novel in its structure, but it must be told in the first person and grounded in the narrator's actual lived experiences. John Beverley also emphasizes that it should exist in written form rather than remain purely oral, which further narrows its connection to traditional ideas of "literature," rooted in the Latin *littera*, meaning written text or script. However, with the peace agreements that put an end to the civil wars (and with the end of their Cold War frame), it was then claimed that the genre had come to an end. John Beverley, for instance, asserted that the "moment of *testimonio* is over" ("The Real Thing," 77). Georg M. Gugelberger adds in his "Introduction" to the collection of essays *The Real Thing*, devoted to the genre, that "The publication of this collection clearly comes at a time when the initial interest in the genre has begun to fade, perhaps due to the developments since 1989 that took down the wall between an outdated binary" (7) Nevertheless, here I ask whether this "moment" is really behind us or whether we can re-read Central American fiction today—at least in part—as a repetition or a return to the testimonial impulse from a post-war era.

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1. Here, I am referring to the civil wars that began in most of the Central American countries during the early 1970s (except Guatemala) and continued till the late 1990s. In Guatemala, the war began around the 1960s, and the peace agreement was signed in the year 1996. In El Salvador, the peace agreement was signed in 1992. However, many critics such as Alexandra Ortiz Wallner and Arturo Arias (in *El arte de fictionar* and *Taking Their Word*, respectively) note that, effectively, the peace process in the region began in the late eighties and accelerated after the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Government in 1990.

2. George Yúdice states: "testimonial writing thus fits into and contributes to the ongoing challenge to the literary, which is no longer understood simply as an autonomous cultural activity conditioned by social and political factors" ("Testimonio and Postmodernism" 47).

I propose that *testimonio* is, above all, a perspective from which to read a literary work; it is one way (among many) to understand or interpret a particular narrative. Thus, a text approached as *testimonio* contains literary elements as much as literature contains testimonial elements. *Testimonio* can function as a reading approach across different historical moments, continuing to serve as a means of expressing resistance to injustice in contemporary Central American society. Scholars like John Beverley have argued that works predating their formal recognition in Latin America can still be interpreted as *testimonios*. This suggests that what makes a text a testimonial lies less in its inherent form than in how critics choose to interpret it. For instance, Beverley considers works such as colonial chronicles, national essays like *Facundo* and *Os sertões*, and even wartime diaries by figures such as Simón Bolívar and José Martí as *testimonios* ("The Margin at the Center" 31). Similarly, *Biografía de un cimarrón* is often classified as *testimonio* despite being labeled as a biography in Spanish and an autobiography in English. This raises the question of how *testimonio* can be distinguished from related forms such as biography, autobiography, chronicle, or diary. Ultimately, it was the critics' emphasis on political struggle in their interpretations that shaped the concept of *testimonio*. Rather than having a single, fixed definition, the genre has been understood differently by various scholars. What remains central, however, is the interpretive lens—the mode of reading—which has consistently defined *testimonio* from its early conceptualizations through the postwar period. Reading *testimonio* is a phenomenon that has always existed and shares similarities with other literary and non-literary genres.³ Thus, reading literary accounts as *testimonio* not only bridges many dichotomies (like fact and fiction, truth and falsity) but also links the past and the present Central American social situation. *Testimonio* is a way to revisit the past and connect it to the present. Narratives read as *testimonio* have also served as an alternative voice to official history. Hence, they are important sources that should not be overlooked because the genre is allegedly over; instead, they should be further explored.

Testimonial perception allows us to critically review the past and respond appropriately in the present. The definition of reading *testimonio* I am presenting maintains a connection and continuity with earlier definitions of *testimonio* and with earlier testimonial texts. One common element is the injustice we observe in both the past and the present. Although the causes of injustices have shifted from authoritarian governments to post-war peace agreements, the core issue remains the same. For example, even if there is no civil war in Central America now, we see its repercussions through migration to the North. As long as Central American narratives highlight societal injustices and the struggles to overcome them, *testimonio* will continue to give voice to the voiceless and shed light on these stories. Therefore, we cannot dismiss previous definitions (though we must expand our understanding of *testimonio* as an approach to narratives), the context from which *testimonio* emerged, or ignore earlier testimonials (the *testimonios* of the eighties, which I refer here as classic *testimonio*), since they help us better understand both current narratives as *testimonio* and the contemporary Central American situation. Naturally, there are differences between the periods (the seventies and eighties versus the post-war period) and their related texts. Contemporary fiction does not merely imitate earlier forms; it offers critique while emphasizing continuity with the past. I interpret this coexistence of critique and continuity as postmodern parody, which Linda Hutcheon defines as

a contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history. This paradoxical conviction of the remoteness of the past and the need to deal with it in the present has been called the 'allegorical impulse' of postmodernism ... I would simply

3. Beverley explains: "*Testimonio* may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novela-*testimonio*, nonfiction novel, or 'factographic' literature" (31).

Based on this, I see contemporary fiction as parody and suggest that it (still) calls for a reading in terms of *testimonio*.

Unlike the testimonial accounts upon which it draws, post-war fiction tends to be more disillusioned. The novels I will be examining question the hope of building a just society in the wake of a violent civil war. Violence, oppression, and injustice are still featured in today's Central American countries, and this is reflected in their literature. But it is also for this reason that these works of fiction can still be approached as *testimonio*: they share the denunciatory and critical impulse of classical *testimonio*, if not their faith in the potential power of social struggle. However, not only does the content of contemporary narratives demonstrate the persistence of the testimonial impulse in these texts, but also their form. Many formal elements, characteristic of the *testimonio* genre —such as first-person narration reflecting a larger community or the dialogue between the narrator and a compiler— are common in earlier works and remain evident in contemporary fiction. However, while this literature echoes its predecessors, it also differs in various ways. This blend of similarity and reconfiguration challenges key aspects of the definition of *testimonio* offered by most North American scholars at the genre's peak. Thus, on the one hand, reading contemporary fiction as *testimonio* raises questions about earlier definitions, and on the other, it prompts us to reconsider classic *testimonios* and their effectiveness. To what extent did *testimonio*, as previously conceived, contribute to peace and equality in Central American countries? Did those aspects that seemed to distinguish *testimonio* in opposition to hitherto hegemonic forms of literature succeed, or did they perhaps close off other possible avenues of political and aesthetic expression? Reading contemporary fiction as *testimonio* offers an alternative way of approaching Central American literature today; limiting our appreciation of it to its literary qualities would mean restricting its potential, much as happened (if in reverse) to the testimonial genre.

The texts *El asco: Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador* and *Insensatez* not only reveal the reality of post-war disillusionment but bring *testimonio* to life and insist that the testimonial strategy can still address oppression, violence, and injustice. These texts have elements that defined classic *testimonio* —the key factors that not only separated the genre from other literary forms but also provoked controversy and debate— and they prompt us to reconsider whether *testimonio* (now understood above all as a reading strategy) is really over or still has purchase today. They emphasize the importance of past struggles, dreams, and failures. However, they also reflect on ongoing problems and issues that thwart the desire to create such a society, and therefore, they can be seen as a parody of the classic *testimonio*. The question that arises here is not simply how *testimonio*, as a reading strategy thought to be over with the end of the civil war, allows us insight into these recent texts and how they address contemporary social issues. Are these texts not also trying to tell us about the readings of classic *testimonio*, the problems that such narratives raised, and the connections that can be drawn between the earlier readings and current ones?

Indeed, contemporary stories can also be read as fiction by readers unaware of their testimonial aspects; however, this may limit the content's potential for heterogeneous interpretation. Reading Central American fiction as *testimonio* is not simply a matter of recognizing the testimonial techniques the authors have used to tell these stories but also of gaining a deeper understanding of the palimpsestic complexity of these texts. For if we see *testimonio* to be over and contemporary fiction as a new beginning, we obscure these novels' relationship with a past that, as Hutcheon points out in her discussion of parody, "is not

something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled ... the past is something with which we must come to terms" (55). Parody is one way of navigating the past. The post-war fiction that I discuss here, therefore, shows continuity with the past —acknowledges it— and at the same time examines it, perhaps to make readers aware of how things once were, its consequences, and how that history is repeated in the present. Mackenbach observes that: "Todas estas novelas utilizan la historia como pretexto/pre-texto para la literatura y se valen de la memoria como recurso ficcional" [All these novels use history as a pretext/pre-text for literature and use memory as a formal resource] ("Narrativas de la memoria en Centroamérica" 248). Contemporary works parody the testimonial tradition, yet this parody is lost if readers are unaware of the critical discussion on classic *testimonios* against which the new readings are set; if so, these narratives are just limited to fiction, much as earlier texts (like I, *Rigoberta Menchú*, *Miguel Mármol*, and *Si me permiten hablar*) were just limited to *testimonio*. For parody does not only critiques the earlier form but also pays homage to it. Parody emphasizes the ongoing importance of *testimonio* in the present and questions its definitions and critical aspects.

My reading of the post-war narratives will, then, suggest new ways to approach Central American literature as *testimonio*. In the following sections, I highlight the resemblance between contemporary texts and *testimonio*, note their differences from the earlier works, and discuss how Central American fiction can be interpreted as a postmodern parody of classic *testimonio*. I have divided my analysis of *testimonio* into two subthemes: the treatment of fact and fiction, and the hierarchical relationship between the compiler and the witness.

Fact Versus Fiction

John Beverley proposes that the testimonial genre is concerned more with fact than fiction ("the real thing")⁴. This is what differentiates *testimonio* from literature. However, it was precisely because such authenticity was defined as what was at stake in *testimonio* that so much controversy erupted around Rigoberta Menchú's story *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*. After all, this had been read very much as a valid, factual story whose truthfulness and representativity could not be questioned, only to be then challenged by anthropologist David Stoll in his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Arturo Arias states:

Stoll launched a campaign against the cultural representation in Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* that was successful largely because American critics, not Menchú, claimed that her text sought to represent all the poor people of Guatemala and all Indigenous peoples on the continent. (*Taking their Word* xxi)

Contemporary fiction avoids this trap. Though it does indeed claim a form of referentiality, insisting on specific facts of post-Civil War society, it also questions whether a text can be only factual or only fictional and makes us doubt how we read *testimonio* and literature differently. Since these stories are notionally works of fiction and presented as such, even as they continually introduce specific moments of precise referentiality, they make us wonder whether a fictional text can or should be read as *testimonio* (or a testimonial text be read as fiction).

For instance, Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (2004) presents many true incidents with a fictional coating. This is the tale of a man whose job is to read through testimonial texts in the aftermath of a civil war. Told in the first person, the nameless narrator in a nameless country is a reporter from El Salvador who had to leave his country after writing a controversial article about its president. He is offered a job by his friend Erick, whom he had met in Mexico during his exile, where Erick was completing his postgraduate studies. Erick offers him

4. Beverley states in 'The Margin at the Center': "Unlike the novel, *testimonio* promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness." (26)

the job of compiling and editing *testimonios* written by Indigenous people as part of a project conducted by the Catholic Church. Now, though the name of the country where the narrative is set is not mentioned in the text, there are ample clues to show that it is Guatemala. For instance, the narrator discusses the Kaqchikel indigenous people; he mentions the Mam ethnic group and refers to General Otto Pérez Molina, though disguised as Octavio Pérez Mena. About this reference, Castellanos Moya would later say:

Octavio Pérez Mena, nombre de ficción que remite a otro real: Otto Pérez Molina, actual presidente de Guatemala, signado durante el juicio como coordinador de la represión en aquellos años, a partir de varios testimonios e investigaciones.

(Castellanos Moya Quoted by Ángel Berlanga, n.p.)

[Octavio Pérez Mena, a fictional name that refers to a real one: Otto Pérez Molina, the current president of Guatemala, who during the trial was identified as a coordinator of the repression in those years, according to various testimonies and investigations.]

Further, the novel mentions the name of Ríos Montt, Guatemalan President in the early 1980s and subsequently indicted for human rights abuses and crimes against humanity, when the army brutally kills the civil registrar of a village called Tototícapan for refusing to hand them over a list of the village's dead. The state needed such a list to "revivirlos y que pudieran votar a favor del partido del general Ríos Montt" [bring them back to life so that they could vote in favor of General Ríos Montt's party] (*Insensatez* 72). When asked in an interview about the connection between the names in the book and real life, Castellanos Moya adds:

También ahí hay una referencia a otro, Francisco Ortega Menaldo. Eran los dos jefes de inteligencia más famosos, formados en Israel y en Estados Unidos. Son tipos muy listos, no son los típicos matarifes. Es una sociedad muy jodida la guatemalteca.

(Castellanos Moya Quoted by Ángel Berlanga, n.p.)

[There's also a reference there to another person, Francisco Ortega Menaldo. They were the two most famous intelligence chiefs, trained in Israel and the United States. They're very smart guys —not the typical slaughterers. Guatemalan society is really messed up.]

Indeed, the *testimonio* of the Indigenous people that the protagonist is compiling in the text is set against the report *Guatemala nunca más*, as Ortiz Wallner reveals:

El informe *Guatemala nunca más* (1998), que recopila testimonios de los sobrevivientes de las masacres sufridas por los pueblos indígenas en Guatemala, fue presentado oficialmente al público en Guatemala el 24 de abril de 1998 en una ceremonia presidida por monseñor Juan Gerardi ... Este informe ha sido identificado como el intertexto más importante de la novela de Castellanos Moya.

(*El arte de ficcionar* 152)

[The report *Guatemala nunca más* (1998), which compiles testimonies from survivors of the massacres suffered by Indigenous peoples in Guatemala, was officially presented to the public in Guatemala on April 24, 1998, in a ceremony presided over by Juan Gerardi. ... This report has been identified as the most important intertext of Horacio Castellanos Moya's novel.]

Insensatez can thus be read as *testimonio* because it invokes the names and actions of those who led the repression in Guatemala.

Castellanos Moya's *El asco* consists of an uninterrupted monologue (without even paragraph breaks) by a character named Edgardo Vega, who conveys his frustration and hatred toward El Salvador to his friend Moya, who is also the text's compiler. Vega is now a Canadian citizen living in Montreal and a Professor of Art History at McGill University. He travels to San Salvador to attend his mother's funeral and to claim his part of the property that she has bequeathed. During the visit, he meets Moya in a bar and complains about the country. In *El asco*, the conflict between fact and fiction is demonstrated through the similarities between the character and compiler Moya, on the one hand, and the author Horacio Castellanos Moya, on the other. The relationship between the compiler and the author raises an important question —whether Moya, the compiler, and Castellanos Moya, the author, are the same person— that focuses on the role of the witness and the compiler in a reading of *testimonio*. *El asco*, a fictional work, subverts the concepts of authenticity and the "truth value" of the testimonial genre, which critics often claim are key factors in distinguishing it from other genres. The primary resemblance between the Moyas is that they are both writers. The other similarity is that the compiler, Moya, is from Tegucigalpa (Honduras), like the actual writer. For instance, Vega comments to his friend Moya: "Vos naciste en Tegucigalpa, Moya, y te pasaste los diez años de la Guerra en México, por eso no entiendo qué haces aquí" [You were born in Tegucigalpa, Moya, and you spent the ten years of the war in Mexico, so I don't understand what you're doing here] (*El asco* 25-26). This relation between the Moyas brings the link between fact and fiction to the fore. The facts about the writer Moya relate to the fictional character in the text. It forces the reader to ask whether reading *testimonio* differs from reading fiction and vice versa. It makes us rethink the rigid line drawn between fact and fiction in testimonial reading as much as in what is notionally fiction. It also makes us reconsider the concepts such as truth and authenticity that dominated the reception of texts read as *testimonio* in the eighties. Can these contemporary works of fiction be categorized as unreal or inauthentic? Can we not verify the factual evidence mentioned in these narratives? How can we, then, distinguish them from *testimonio*?

Another example from the same text concerns its subtitle, *Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador*, which addresses the narrator, the protagonist, or witness Edgardo Vega. The identification of this narrator is ambivalent, as the text makes clear from the start, in a brief preface that states:

Edgardo —Vega, el personaje central de este relato, existe: reside en Montreal bajo un nombre distinto— un nombre sajón que tampoco es Thomas Bernhard. Me comunicó sus opiniones seguramente con mayor énfasis y descarno del que contienen en este texto. Quise suavizar aquellos puntos de vista que hubieran escandalizado a ciertos lectores.

(*El asco* 11).

[Edgardo —Vega, the central character of this story, exists: he lives in Montreal under a different name— a Saxon name that is also not Thomas Bernhard. He shared his opinions with me, probably with more emphasis and boldness than they are contained in this text. I wanted to soften those points of view that might have scandalized certain readers.]

So Vega is and is not the real writer Thomas Bernhard, just as he both is and is not another, unnamed but real resident of Montreal.⁵ *El asco* plays with the distinction between truth and fiction, so that, on the one hand, it can be read as a fictional text, but, on the other, it claims to be

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Julio / July 2026

5. Thomas Bernhard was an Austrian author known for his stinging social critique. Castellanos Moya explains, in an authorial postscript, the reason behind choosing this writer and his stylistic approach to denounce post-war El Salvador. He says that he has adapted the style from Bernhard "tanto en su prosa, basada en la cadencia y la repetición, como en su temática, que contiene una crítica acerba a Austria y su cultura" (*El asco* 136). He adds that "yo me había divertido durante la escritura de este libro, en el que quise hacer una demolición cultural y política de San Salvador, al igual que Bernhard la había hecho de Salzburgo, con el placer de la diatriba y el remedo" (136).

a “truthful” story narrated and compiled by real people. Ortiz Wallner observes that the Preface “ironiza la situación narrador/testimoniante-autor/recopilador al prevenir al lector” [The narrator/testimony author/collector humorously comments on the situation by warning the reader] (*El arte de ficcionar* 138-139).⁶ She further adds that “de esta manera queda planteada la ambigüedad de la narración en tanto que declarar la ‘verdad’ sobre lo que el lector está a punto de leer es, a la vez, un desenmascaramiento de la confección ficcional-literaria” [in this manner, the ambiguity of the narration is established as it declares that the ‘truth’ of what will be read is, at the same time, an unmasking of the fictional-literary artifice] (*El arte de ficcionar* 139).

In *Insensatez*, too, one can notice similarities with previous testimonial readings, as it is based on many accurate and factual events. Yet, it creates a hybrid discourse between the narrative told by the principal protagonist, which is “fiction” (though it mentions the names of some people and ethnic groups that exist in reality), and the narratives of the *testimonio*, which should be read as “fact.” *Insensatez* juxtaposes the traditional and contemporary narrative forms, thereby challenging the understanding of *testimonio* within the Western canon. This story is narrated mainly in the first person, but readers are also aware that the phrases from the *testimonios* the protagonist is reading have affected him throughout. These phrases occasionally interrupt the narration, especially as the plot develops. Gradually, a connection evolves between the protagonist and his work: it does not matter whether the voice is the narrator’s or from the *testimonios* that he is compiling, and thus the line between fact and fiction gets blurred. As Ileana Rodríguez describes it: “A medida que el narrador-editor avanza en las correcciones del texto de la verdad para lo cual lo han empleado, el poder literario del texto va fomentando el terror en él mismo, que ya no es capaz de distinguir entre texto y contexto, ficción y realidad” [As the narrator-editor progresses in correcting the text of the truth for which he has been employed, the literary power of the text begins to foster terror within himself, to the point that he can no longer distinguish between text and context, fiction and reality.] (“Estéticas de esperanza, memoria y desencanto” 34). The act of compiling *testimonios* in a fictional context is itself a challenge to earlier readings.

Contemporary texts not only repeat familiar literary devices but also, in turn, challenge the idea of literature and *testimonio* as separate categories that cannot be connected. *Insensatez* challenges the definition of the *testimonio* genre, which subordinates literary value to purported truth. According to Beverley, “unlike the novel, *testimonio* promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness” (“The Margin at the Center”). However, throughout Castellanos Moya’s novel, the narrator collects snippets from the *testimonios* he is reading, comparing them to literature rather than being overly preoccupied with their “sincerity.” For instance, he reads aloud lines that he has noted down from the *testimonios* to his friend Toto, a poet, and describes them as “cápsulas concentradas de dolor ... cuyas frases tenían tal sonoridad, fuerza y profundidad que yo había apuntado ya algunas de ellas en mi libreta personal” [Concentrated capsules of pain ... whose phrases had such resonance, force, and depth that I had already written some of them down in my personal notebook] (*Insensatez* 30). He further addresses Toto as a poet who will be interested in these poetic phrases: “Escucha esta lindura, vos que sos poeta.” [Listen to this beauty, as you are a poet.] Yet at some point he realizes that Toto is not interested in the poetic lines as he sadly notes: “Y lo observé de nuevo, porque ahora sí tenía que haber encajado esos versos que para mí expresaban toda la desolación después de la masacre, pero no para mi compadre Toto, más agricultor que poeta, como descubrí con pena” [And I looked at him again, because by then those verses, which for me expressed all the desolation after the massacre. But not for my compadre/colleague Toto, who was more farmer than poet, as I painfully discovered.] (*Insensatez* 31).

6. According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodern parody “is fundamentally ironic and critical” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 94). She further states in *Irony’s Edge* that “irony’s edge gives parody its ‘critical’ dimension in its marking of difference at the heart of similarity” (3). Irony and Parody, therefore, seem to be interrelated. As Hutcheon explains that the parodic approach towards a creative work has an ironic critical aspect.

Another example that again proves the narrator's appreciation of the *testimonios* more as literature than in terms of their sincerity is when he compares their style with that of the Peruvian poet César Vallejo: "esas intensas figuras de lenguaje y en la curiosa construcción sintáctica que me recordaba a poetas como el peruano César Vallejo" [those intense figures of speech and the curious syntactic construction that reminded me of poets like the Peruvian César Vallejo] (Insensatez 32). Elsewhere, he defines the reading of *testimonio* as literary: "aquellas frases que me parecían estupendas literariamente, que jamás volvería a compartir con poetas insensibles como mi compadre Toto y que con suerte podría utilizar posteriormente en algún tipo de collage literario" [those phrases that I thought were literary wonderful, that I would never share again with insensitive poets like my colleague/pal Toto, and that I might, at best, use later in some kind of literary collage] (Insensatez 43). Rodríguez notes that:

La tentación de novelar los datos, de convertir la historia en ficción, es lo que promueve la substracción de las frases poéticas, pero a la vez el narrador-editor se da cuenta de que lo que está haciendo es leer el testimonio del sufrimiento histórico como ficción, no como represión política sino como creación estética.

(Insensatez 36).

[The temptation to fictionalize the data, to turn history into fiction, is what promotes the subtraction of poetic phrases, but at the same time, the narrator-editor realizes that what he is doing is reading the testimony of historical suffering as fiction, not as political repression but as aesthetic creation.]

These examples thus raise questions about the definitions invoked in the past in the stark comparison between literature and *testimonio*. They also demonstrate that novels like *El asco* and *Insensatez* should be open to readers' interpretations—they can be read as fiction as well as *testimonio* (just as the classic *testimonios*). Approaching these texts as fiction and *testimonio* demonstrates that literature and *testimonio* can coexist in a single narrative without erasing or dominating the other. Instead, it retains the content's complexity.

Insensatez subverts the testimonial genre from the perspective of a compiler who "no está completo de la mente" [not all there mentally] (13), and is more interested in appreciating the literariness of the texts he reads than in seeking their truth value, sincerity, or authenticity. The novel also shows tension between the protagonist, who enjoys reading the *testimonios*, and his colleagues, who do not. For instance, his colleague Pilar, who seems very serious and dedicated to her job, loses interest when the narrator reads a fragment from a *testimonio*; his friend Toto, a poet, also loses interest when he recites the fragments. Moreover, the Monsignor and the church director, Mynor, react strangely when the narrator relates a phrase from his notebook:

Monseñor se me quedó viendo con una mirada indescifrable tras sus gafas de cristales ahumados y montura de carey, una mirada que me hizo temer que él me considerara un literato alucinado en busca de versos donde lo que había era una brutal denuncia de los crímenes de lesa humanidad perpetrados por el ejército contra las comunidades indígenas de su país, que él pensara que yo era un mero estilista que pasaba por alto el contenido del informe, por lo que me abstuve de leer frase y más bien comencé a hablar de la estructura y del capitulado, del enfoque psico-social y de la clasificación de las afecciones mentales de las víctimas.

(Insensatez 68-69)

[The Monsignor looked at me with an inscrutable gaze behind his smoked glasses and tortoiseshell frame, a look that made me fear he considered me a deluded writer searching for verses when what there was instead was a brutal denunciation of the crimes against humanity committed by the army against the indigenous communities of his country, that he thought I was just a stylist overlooking the content of the report, so I refrained from reading the sentence and instead began to talk about the structure and the chapter, about the psycho-social approach and the classification of the mental conditions of the victims.]

The restrictions that framed the testimonial genre during the eighties and nineties continue to impose on contemporary readings, in the form of injunctions against exploring literary aspects of the *testimonio* genre or testimonial aspects of literature. This quote further divides how we approach literary works and other fields of social sciences. It makes us wonder why there is a need to ignore the stylistic approach in traumatic *testimonios*. Why can we not appreciate and focus on the literary aspects and the traumatic events in the same text? Ortiz Wallner states that “el narrador va a vivir en aislamiento esta admiración y fascinación, pues no encontrará interlocutores con quienes compartir la forma en que estas frases le afectan. Nadie le escucha, nadie se interesa” [The narrator will live in isolation with this admiration and fascination, for he will not find anyone to share how these phrases affect him. No one listens to him, no one is interested.] (*El arte de ficcionar*, 154). Yet these factors (literary versus *testimonio*, fact versus fiction) are questioned and subverted here, as the novel’s narrator critiques the perception of reading a text as *testimonio* within the canon and, therefore, juxtaposes his interest in the literary aspects of the account and others’ reaction to it in the plot.

The Compiler and the Witness

Like classic *testimonios*, contemporary fictional works establish a relationship between a compiler and a witness, making the text a dialogue between two or more people rather than a monologue. However, these works also challenge the role of the compiler as an intellectual and, therefore, his or her supposedly “superior” position from which to judge and organize the witness’s account. The notion of the intellectual in *testimonio* is meant to provide a platform for the subaltern voice. Still, it marks off the intellectuals from the marginalized and the unlettered. It suggests that, though the subaltern perspective is essential, scholars must monitor, mediate, and even correct it.

El asco has aspects that defined the reading of *testimonio* in the eighties and nineties. The text is narrated in the first person by Vega to his friend and compiler, Moya. Alongside his narrative, Vega talks about El Salvador and comments on the country’s post-war situation. Characteristics of *testimonio* as a genre found in this text include orality—evidenced by long, sometimes repetitious sentences as in classic *testimonio*—a first-person narrative, and a preoccupation with the country’s socio-political condition. Further, we can observe the presence of a compiler and a witness, with the witness narrating the story to the compiler, who compiles it for the readers. In *El asco*, the act of re-telling and shaping the witness’s story is brought to the fore, and the novel draws our attention to the complexity of the narrative style involved in reading *testimonio*. Here, the reader knows from the beginning that the text is mediated. For the compiler’s voice is more active in Castellanos Moya’s novel than it is elsewhere: he is narrating to the reader the story that Vega has told him. Though the tale he tells is narrated in the first person, readers realize from the outset that this is a mediated text and that they are not receiving the narration directly from the narrator or witness but only from another person interpreting it. Moreover, in this case, the compiler is another character in the book:

Moya is Vega's childhood friend. In most classic testimonial accounts, the compiler only comes to know and understand the witness from the story he or she narrates (as he or she compiles it). Here, however, the opening sentence of the book makes readers aware of the narrative complexity: "Suerte que viniste, Moya, tenía mis dudas que vinieras, porque este lugar no le gusta a mucha gente en esta ciudad, hay gente a la que no le gusta nada este lugar, Moya, por eso no estaba seguro de si vos ibas a venir, me dijo Vega" [Good thing you came, Moya. I had my doubts that you would, because a lot of people in this city don't like this place —there are people who can't stand this place at all, Moya. That's why I wasn't sure whether you were going to come, Vega told me] (*El asco* 15). As critic Megan Thornton notes, the repeated use of the phrase "me dijo Vega" "Vega told me" throughout the text makes the reader conscious of the compiler's presence: "Adding 'me dijo Vega' at the end explicitly marks Moya's presence in the conversation and makes clear his role as the transcriber of Vega's story, a presence that a traditional editor of the *testimonio* may hide" ("A Postwar Perversion" 209). *El asco* thus compels its readers to rethink the relationship between narrators and compilers. Do they have to get to know each other and build their friendship over time, or can there be an informal, friendly relationship even before the narrator tells their story to the compiler?

This question leads us to another: must there be a hierarchy between compiler and narrator in testimonial readings? Beverley and Zimmerman explain that:

Since in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer or intellectual, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, writer, or social activist (*Literature and Politics* 173).

The principal characteristic defining *testimonio* in the eighties and nineties was that the witness should be an (effectively) illiterate person who narrated his or her story to a compiler who was literate, generally an intellectual, who edited, arranged, and organized the story so that it could be read worldwide.⁷ However, in *El asco*, both characters studied at the same school; both were educated and well-qualified. Thus, the text questions if there is any need for a hierarchy between a witness and an intellectual. Edgardo Vega is a professor at McGill University in Canada, while his compiler is a struggling writer in El Salvador. If anything, then the hierarchy is reversed. The book questions the subalternity of the voice brought to our attention through the intellectual's intervention. All this again forces us to re-read *testimonio* in a new way. We should not restrict ourselves to the assumption that we will hear only subaltern voices or factual events in a text treated as *testimonio*, or an unauthentic story in a text treated as fiction. (In fact, there is always more than this.) Our readings should always open up new possibilities of exploring testimonial elements in literature and literary elements in *testimonio*.

In *Insensatez*, the narrator's habit of collecting key phrases from the *testimonios* he reads highlights both similarity and difference. As mentioned before, he keeps a notebook where he writes down sentences from the *testimonios* he compiles. The opening lines introduce this habit: "Yo no estoy completo de la mente, decía la frase que subrayé con el marcado amarillo y que hasta pasé en limpio en mi libreta personal" (*Insensatez* 13). [I am not complete sound of mind, stated the sentence I highlighted and rewrote on my personal notebook]. This annotation practice is similar to the classic *testimonio*, where the ethnographer, intellectual, or compiler records, edits, and organizes oral accounts that are later written down. It also highlights

7. Of course, there are exceptions or complications to this rule, such as *The Little School* and *La noche de Tlatelolco*. The latter features a variety of informants, including students, administrators, army officers, and professors. In *The Little School*, the narrator is not Indigenous or a factory worker but a university student, and it is a compilation of testimonial short stories, that is, a hybrid genre.

the presence of the compiler's voice in *testimonio*, foregrounding the fact that there is a medium between the witness and the readers. Thus, contemporary fiction demonstrates that witnesses' testimony never reaches its readers without some intervention; instead, such stories are mediated at various levels. Moreover, the narrator challenges the relationship between compiler and witness in this book by linking the phrase "yo no estoy completo de la mente" to himself. He identifies with this phrase and therefore warns readers to be cautious, as his compilation may not be entirely trustworthy.

The notion that first-person narrative should be one of *testimonio's* defining factors (as it is, for instance, for Beverley) is also problematized in *Insensatez*. For instance, the narrator comes across the *testimonio* of a man who, literally speechless, dumb, was nonetheless tortured by the army to confess the names of other collaborators of the guerrilla, and was beaten for his silence in front of others:

el sargento comenzará a infringirle incisiones en el cuerpo con el yatagan, a los gritos de «¡habla, indio hijo de la gran puta, antes de que me calientes los huevos!», pero el mudito nada más abría desorbitadamente los ojos de tal forma que parecía que saldrían de sus cuencas a causa del terror

(*Insensatez* 28).

[The sergeant would begin inflicting cuts on his body with the yatagan, shouting, 'Talk, you indian son of a bitch, before you really piss me off!', but the mute would only open his eyes wildly, so much so that it seemed they would pop out of their sockets from sheer terror.]

This *testimonio* was not told by the dumb man but by someone who must have witnessed the event and relayed his expressions. Subsequently, the compiler tells the story to his friend and, in turn, to the readers since it is through his narration that we learn about the incident. He adds that this was "un sargento bastante bruto si consideramos que destazó al mudito sin darse cuenta de que esos gritos no eran solo de dolor, sino de un mudito para quien esa era su única forma de expresión" [a pretty rough sergeant considering he slaughtered the mute without realizing that those screams weren't just of pain, but from a mute whose only form of expression was those screams] (29). *Insensatez*, therefore, makes us think twice, not only about what is said in *testimonio* (expressions through words or sounds) but also how it questions both content and form as it makes us reassess how we approach such narratives. John Beverley notes that

as *testimonio* implies a new kind of relation between narrator and reader, the contradictions of sex, class, race, and age that frame the narrative's production can also reproduce themselves in the relation of narrator to this direct interlocutor ("The Margin at the Center" 30).

However, in case of *Insensatez*, we observe that in the form, the book shows that these narratives do not reach readers directly; they traverse other layers before reaching an interlocutor. Thus, the relation between the narrator and the interlocutor is not 'direct', but mediated.

Further, it raises the question of whether the compiler's work can be fully trusted. The content compels us to think about how we can analyze and approach such works without dividing them between fact and fiction or literature and *testimonio*. Contemporary narratives such as *Insensatez* address the complexity of the testimonial form (as well as the fictional form) and ask the reader to consider whether texts like *Insensatez* might also be read as *testimonio*. Castellanos Moya's narrator clarifies, moreover, through his repeated quotation and appreciation of phrases taken from indigenous testimonies, that there is little need to edit or

organize these *testimonios*, even if their authors are uneducated or even illiterate. They have a power of their own. Asked by the director of the Archbishopric about the quality of the texts he has found, the narrator answers that: “la calidad no era el problema sino la cantidad” [The quality is not a problem rather the quantity] (38). Indeed, the narrator repeatedly challenges the hierarchical division between witness and compiler. As he puts it on one occasion:

Lo que pienso es que pienso yo ... carajo, o esta otra, Tanto en sufrimiento que hemos sufrido tanto con ellos ... cuya musicalidad me dejó perplejo desde el primer momento, cuya calidad poética era demasiada como para no sospechar que procedía de un gran poeta y no de una anciana indígena que con ese verso finalizaba su desgarrador testimonio que ahora no viene al caso.

(*Insensatez* 43).

[What I think is that I think ... damn it, or this other one, ‘So much in suffering that we have suffered so much with them ... whose musicality left me perplexed from the very first moment, whose poetic quality was so great that it can be suspected that it came from a great poet and not from an Indigenous old woman who ended her harrowing testimony with that line, which is not relevant here now.]

Here, the narrator appreciates the literariness of the testimonial genre and, at the same time, is stunned by the way these indigenous people have described their trauma. The narrator focuses both on the horrific events that occurred in the indigenous communities and on their capability to narrate such incidents poetically.

Parody and Postmodernism

El asco and *Insensatez* are contemporary works of fiction that can also be read as *testimonio*. But at the same time, they critique and question fundamental aspects of the testimonial genre. I propose this (questioning and critiquing) strategy as a parody: they parody the *testimonio* genre. As Linda Hutcheon explains, parody is a means of ridicule and a way to critique the background text against which contemporary fiction has been set. However, parody does not simply set two works of art against each other that interrelate in a certain way; instead, the kind of parody Hutcheon is talking about is “an integrated structural modeling process of revising, replaying, inverting and ‘trans-contextualizing’ previous works of art” (*A Theory of Parody* 11). It is not an imitation of the past but the creation of a new model; it gives the later text a new meaning; it is complex and incorporates critical reflection. Hutcheon states that “the auto-reflexivity of modern art forms often takes the form of parody and, when it does so, it provides a new model for artistic process” (*A Theory of Parody* 5). Difference and “distanciation” (10) are the two essential characteristics of parody, as it establishes the past as a model while simultaneously critiquing and subverting it. As Hutcheon says, “parody is doubly coded in political terms: it legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies. This kind of authorized transgression is what makes it a ready vehicle for the political contradictions of postmodernism at large” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 97). It questions the past and its representation as we know it in the present through fiction and other genres, but simultaneously demonstrates continuity with the past.

Reading contemporary fiction as *testimonio*, then, can challenge the concept of the genre as it emerged in the seventies on the one hand and, on the other, can show how the testimonial impulse has been adapted to address the region’s current social and political situation; it insists on bringing back to life a genre or an approach (to narrative)

once considered dead. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, citing architect Robert Stern:

in search for a wider base for form, the classical tradition offers a set of references that remain meaningful to the public and continue to demonstrate their compositional usefulness In recognizing this, we do not necessarily argue for a return to or revival of the past, but rather for recognition of the continuity of the past in the present. (*A Theory of Parody* 113).

These fictional works demonstrate the continuity with the past when we read and compare them to the classic *testimonio*.

El asco and *Insensatez* can be termed postmodern in that they use "the reappropriated forms of the past to speak to society, while still questioning it" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 12); according to Hutcheon, this is a characteristic of postmodern fiction, which she says "often thematizes this process of turning events into facts through the filtering and interpreting of archival documents" (54). Hutcheon adds that:

There are important parallels between the processes of history-writing and fiction-writing and among the most problematic of these are their common assumptions about narrative and about the nature of mimetic representation. The postmodern situation is that a "truth is being told, with 'facts' to back it up, but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts" (Foley 1986: 67). In fact, that teller —of story or history— also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole. (56)

We can then say that classic *testimonios*, defined as factual and authentic, can be termed "truth" constructed and supported by the facts carefully chosen by the narrator, as in contemporary fiction. Where *Insensatez*, for example, demonstrates such a "process of turning events into facts through the filtering and interpreting of archival documents" by building upon the report *Guatemala nunca más*, *El asco* shifts between fact, truth, and fiction "by making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole." This relation between earlier *testimonios* and post-war fiction demonstrates not only the complexity of classic *testimonios*, with their inclusion of literary elements, but also that of contemporary fiction, with its incorporation of testimonial elements.

Hutcheon further argues that no single definition can encompass postmodernism, and she cites Brian McHale in so far as he "points out that every critic 'constructs' postmodernism in his or her own way from different perspectives, none more right or wrong than the others" (10).⁸ Hence, contemporary Central American fiction can also be interpreted in various ways: it not only shows similarities with the testimonial genre but also (say) with mystery novels. They challenge the limitation of these texts, read only under the fictional banner. These literary works raise important social issues, often through humor and an appreciation of the absurd. Rodríguez states about *Insensatez*:

Por medio de esa primera frase de entrada [yo no estoy completo de la mente], el narrador-editor llega a la conclusión de que la totalidad de los habitantes de esa región no está completa de la mente; él mismo tampoco lo está. El estado mental general de locura y perturbación mental aterrizó este texto justo en la psicosis postmoderna.

(35)

8. In turn, Fredric Jameson argues that "As for Postmodernism itself, I have not tried to systematize a usage or to impose any conveniently coherent thumbnail meaning, for the concept is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory. I will argue that, for good or ill, we cannot not use it. But my argument should also be taken to imply that every time it is used, we are under the obligation to rehearse those inner contradictions and to stage those representational inconsistencies and dilemmas; we have to work all that through every time around. Postmodernism is not something we can settle once and for all and then use with a clear conscience. The concept, if there is one, has to come at the end, and not at the beginning, of our discussions of it. Those are the conditions—the only ones, I think, that prevent the mischief of premature clarification—under which this term can productively continue to be used" (*Postmodernism* xxi).

[Through that opening phrase [I am not completely sane], the narrator-editor concludes that none of the inhabitants of that region are of sound mind; he himself is not either. The overall mental state of madness and mental disturbance grounds this text right in postmodern psychosis.]

She further argues that the object of postmodernism “es repensar el proyecto de la modernidad desde la heterogeneidad. Su deber es preguntarse qué tipo y proporción de ella es necesario para convivir y qué hacer con lo que no podemos tolerar” [it is about rethinking the project of modernity from the perspective of heterogeneity. Its task is to ask what kind and proportion of it is necessary for coexistence, and what to do with what we cannot tolerate] (43). Fredric Jameson offers his own understanding of postmodernism, but his ideas resonate with Hutcheon’s when he states that “Postmodernism is not something we can settle once and for all and then use with a clear conscience” (xxi). This is precisely what we have seen in these texts and also what Hutcheon and Rodríguez are arguing. We notice that contemporary Central American fiction cannot be categorized definitively as “settle[d] once and for all” (as we shall further see in the arguments of Hutcheon and Jameson). These texts continue to provoke their readers to further reading and discussion.

When Hutcheon relates postmodernism to parody, she points out that we can understand the past only through its various representations and, therefore, that the representation of history becomes the history of representation: “the history of representation cannot be escaped, but it can be both exploited and commented on critically through irony and parody” (55). For that reason, parody is one such way in which these texts become subversive. It challenges the defining characteristics of the testimonial genre. In that way, it also challenges the manipulation of the market to capitalize on *testimonio* as the “authentic” voice of the subaltern, a voice against literature, and a voice that promotes solidarity and resistance. Parody offers other ways to read *testimonio* —it addresses the issues Central America continues to face and maintains *testimonio* as a reading strategy.

Hutcheon affirms that “there is continuum, but there is also ironic difference, difference induced by that very history” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 90). Yet, Fredric Jameson differs:

we are now, in other words, in ‘intertextuality’ as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect and as the operator of a new connotation of ‘pastness’ and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history. (*Postmodernism* 20)

Contemporary Central American fiction questions “real history”: not just “official” history, but also the (oppositional) history narrated and understood as *testimonio* during the civil wars. They question the narrator’s perspective in *testimonio*, the text’s structure, and the issues it raises. They reread “history” to challenge its status as the only form of understanding the region’s socio-political situation. Contemporary fiction destabilizes the “history” narrated as *testimonio*, as the only source of understanding the past struggle. They explore other possibilities for understanding the past and the legacy that it leaves in today’s post-war epoch. Jameson also questions whether postmodernism may “imply any more fundamental change or break than the periodic style and fashion changes determined by an older high-modernist imperative of stylistic innovation?” (1). I argue that a “fundamental change” could not revive the reading strategy of *testimonio* that was once considered dead. A “fundamental change or break” could have led to different strategies for exploring art and literature, but would have passed over the ongoing potential of

testimonio. Since contemporary fiction emphasizes a connection with the past, it keeps the testimonial impulse alive. Nevertheless, it critiques that past to ask: have past issues been resolved? Are we at peace with the past? Can we bury the past and look toward the future? These fictional works focus on the continued presence of *testimonio*, but they also compel us to go beyond previous definitions and debates to explore other possibilities in the genre.

Conclusion

Literary texts such as *Insensatez* and *El asco* consist of a plurality of narrative voices to evidence perhaps what Jameson describes as “the disappearance of the individual subject,” which has, he argues, “along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche” (*Postmodernism* 16). These fictional stories reflect Jameson’s argument: *El asco* has no single principal character but rather a conversation between two friends; it provides no comprehensive background for Moya or Vega, nor does it describe their physical appearance for the reader to imagine the characters. There are just fragments of the past for readers to get to know the characters, but no concrete image can be formed; instead, a sense of mystery or suspense is attached to them. Likewise, the narrator of *Insensatez* is nameless and shadowy.

The other aspect associated with the “disappearance of individual subject” and “the increasing unavailability of the personal style” can be seen here in the narrator’s death and the demise of a generic style. Both works of fiction feature many narrative voices and a combination of genres (testimonial, thriller, and autobiography). However, the “unavailability of the personal style” simultaneously contributes to the text’s complexity, leaving the reader uneasy because he or she cannot identify with it. This forces us to be active participants rather than passive observers. Limiting them to the characteristics of *testimonio* as a reading style of the eighties and nineties—with a focus on truth and authenticity, facts versus fiction, literature versus *testimonio*, and resistance and solidarity—will strip these texts of their nuances. At the same time, reading them only as fiction, thrillers, or autobiographies will make us overlook the testimonial elements they contain. Thus, they can be read in multiple ways; they defy categorization. They suggest that insisting on such generic divisions in literary or cultural studies can sometimes rule out a potential creative medium (*testimonio* in this case). They make us question how these narratives have been canonized according to rigid criteria and ask us to test further the limits of our understanding of a work of art. For example, here, parody is a literary tool to read contemporary fiction as *testimonio*. I call it parody rather than pastiche for its double-voiced character: the way in which it poses challenges and raises questions about the past. These texts are not the simple imitation of an earlier style. They repeat that style with a certain intention and yet maintain their differences.

One of the criteria for interpreting fiction as a parody of the past literary form is that it can only be understood as a parody if the reader recognizes it. As Hutcheon says,

while parody offers a much more limited and controlled version of this activation of the past by giving it a new and often ironic context, it makes similar demands upon the reader, but these demands are more on his or her knowledge and recollection than on his or her openness to play. (*A Theory of Parody* 5)

The reader needs to be familiar with the background text that has been parodied and to decode the author’s codes to interpret the contemporary work as a parody. *El asco* and *Insensatez* can be decoded

as parodies only when we can set them against the earlier narratives defined as *testimonios* and observe the various changes, negotiations, and challenges that contemporary texts pose to them. Thus, present-day fiction emphasizes the need to know and acknowledge the past by adopting a former model —not nostalgically, but through critical reflection.

These contemporary fictional narratives are in dialogue with the past: they relate to and reflect on a past that seems to be their source of information or point of interest. But that does not mean that they have “immortalized” the past form; through their dialogic structure, they challenge and question the canonization of the genre. They reinvent the past form of storytelling in a new way. As Hutcheon points out, quoting Burden on the “historical consciousness” of parody, it is this “that gives it the potential power both to bury the dead, so to speak, and also to give it new life” (*A Theory of Parody* 101). Nevertheless, beyond a knowledge of the past, these works of fiction also insist on the present condition of Central America. If anything, the social situation, as portrayed in present-day novels, is worse now than ever — the danger, the violence, the fear of being killed without reason or cause. Contemporary narratives, such as *El asco* and *Insensatez*, address these issues while reminding readers of a time when such violence was considered exceptional and when people believed they could, together, put an end to it and create a better Central American society. Thus, we see here the role of parody as a re-creation or construction of a new meaning whose base still holds elements from the past a past as the only reference in these texts to compare the present and a past that cannot be ignored in Central American literature as it keeps haunting the present.

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